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A risky business: taking chances in AFO training.

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In a recent issue of Top Cover, we reported on our work with AFOs on the National Firearms Instructors Course in Kent. One of the key things to come out of our experience with the programme has been a rethink of the sorts of training techniques that seem to work best in this type of setting. In fact, in many ways, working with AFOs has meant a real rethink of the way we do things in general.

On NFIC, trainees have to hit the ground running, and this is true even – or especially - of the “academic input” where trainees get to grips with the training skills they need to pass on their knowledge and experience in a professional and informed way. We like to get our trainees busy from day one planning and delivering sessions, and one of the best examples of training we have seen recently was in a session about dispatching dangerous animals run by two trainees in Kent. The content of the session was, frankly, pretty dry and neither of us was really looking forward to assessing it. There didn’t seem to be much to say about shooting mad bulls and the like which could not have been simply handed out on a fact sheet: where to aim and what calibre of weapon to use seemed the only actual input.

But instead of taking this easy way out, one team of trainees handed out photos of different animals and a grid where trainees themselves could work out and note down how best to deal with the situation. It took a bit longer than handing out a factsheet or reeling off a presentation, but this approach turned out to have a number of serious advantages. On one hand, it freed up the trainer to tackle some of the more interesting questions about the problem. It also gave those who had actually been in such situations a chance to tell the others what the best techniques and approaches were. This did not just give the trainees time to understand why a particular technique would work best, but also to share best practice and swap any innovations or problems they knew about. It also added to the growing sense of recognition of the diversity of the role which can sometimes be forgotten.

What’s interesting is that this is all time well spent: it’s a question of efficiency; if you can gauge what knowledge is there, you can avoid repeating unnecessarily. It also means that the trainer can focus on providing what the trainees really don’t know, just when they need to know it. These things can’t really be predicted by a “one size fits all” approach.

This basically adds up to extra depth, a chance to challenge and ask questions, have mistakes and misconceptions corrected. Crucially, it means the trainer has chance to get an idea how much of a particular topic has actually been understood, because the feedback from the learners isn’t just coming back in the form of a written tick-box with no real application to any sort of context. On the contrary, trainees are discussing a situation in a team, developing a much more realistic situation where reactions and understanding begun to resemble what the trainees might actually do in practice.

We think this sort of thing is quite revealing about what sort of training helps develop skills compared with the sort of training which just doles them out and hopes for the best. We feel it's important to recognise that experience like this is already there in any group of AFOs. In fact, it seems to us that this experience is sometimes ignored or at least downplayed by training techniques which just assume zero knowledge for the convenience of the trainer.

What does this mean on the ground? Well, if there's one thing that we have to deal with it's the problem of "front loading". Everyone who has been subject to it knows that front-loading is all about the trainer. It's about the trainer having the knowledge, and expects that the trainee will be basically passive, in effect just a mug waiting to be filled up to the brim by someone with a jugful of knowledge. This is a caricature of course, but it's a cosy one which is tempting, especially for hard-pressed trainers, because the trainer is in charge and can justify themselves. The trainer decides how much to put in, and if they like they can just keep on going until whether the mug is full or not. That's why, at its worst, this sort of didactic training only asks one sort question: *how much can I fit into an hour? How much can they take? How much can I get onto tis powerpoint? How much have I done? How much do they remember etc etc*. And the answer to all this "how much" is usually already there in a set of bullet points and impersonal information decided somewhere else, by someone else.

Asking "how much" has practical advantages, but the risk of this approach is that it sometimes feels like it was designed for someone else, a "Big Other" who is less interested in how well the training has been done than *how much* of it has been completed. So it's easy for both trainer and trainee to hand over learning to this wiser, better informed Other, with less chance of a buy-in by the trainee. The risk is that learning remains superficial, and there's certainly no way of gauging if anything has really been learnt or adopted in ways that will actually change practices. The traditional end-of-session "knowledge check" might provide a certain amount of information about what has been remembered in small, independent chunks of measurable information. But it's too late at this stage to do anything if the test reveals any problems. So the test itself is worked out to make sure that what it tests is eminently achievable: how much is an easy question to answer. But the crucial question of whether it's useful or important takes a back seat.

In fact, we wonder how often AFOs ask themselves these "how much" questions? This sort of question might be appropriate for some things in firearms, but when being debriefed in the judgement suite, I don't recall being asked too many "how much..." questions. There were plenty of *when* questions (when did you decide..., when did you notice); there were plenty of *where* questions too (where was, where did you) and of course the *why* (why did you decide to, why didn't you....).

Our question is about whether a complex role is really about asking "how much", or wther it's really about those much more interesting questions of *when, where, who, why* and even *what if...* These are not questions that can be answered upstream, and they depend instead on complex decisions that have to be made on the basis of qualitative assessment of the situation and the context.

So we question the usefulness of "front-leading" in some firearms training, because front loading doesn't recognise the way many situations are about interpretations, decisions, reactions. Even apparently fact-based input, like our dangerous animals session, often works best when based around problem solving, or discussion around a scenario, or discovering a way of dealing with things.

This is because AFOs are never, in our experience, empty mugs to be filled, but resourceful, thinking people with a wealth of experience to draw on. This experience may or may not be similar to what we are trying to teach, but people as a rule are actually quite good at transferring knowledge from one domain to another, if you give them the chance, that is. Experience in one branch of work can be put to use in another, and we see time and time again how a hobby, an interest or a seemingly trivial incident actually informs the AFO role in concrete and valuable ways.

That's why one of the things that strikes us every time we do a NFIC is the way in which AFOs pick up on the need to develop and experiment so quickly. This is always a surprise because AFOs are bound to a culture where risk-taking is a double edged-sword.

On one hand, they are out on the streets. But at the back of every officer's mind is that the gun always smokes backwards: every move an AFO makes has to be traceable, and the individual is potentially accountable for every split second decision. Policing is genetically risk averse, which is how it should be when the buck stops here.

On the other hand, though, we know that crucial decision-making situations can't be planned 100% and that risk cannot be eliminated from the job. As trainers, we are interested in the role of risk-taking, especially in training, where a safe environment means that we can do things that help learning in the knowledge that lives don't depend immediately on them. Beyond this, though, we are also interested in the way training can and should take on some aspects of risk-taking because this meets a number of crucial goals. The first of these goals is to work with what AFOs bring to the party. Time and time again we see AFOs arrive on a NFIC programme on day one, exhibiting all the signs of defensiveness one would expect from someone in a new situation. They know the whole programme will challenge them, but AFOs are looking forward to that: after all, they are used to the technical stuff – they wouldn't be on NFIC otherwise. What they are less confident about is the thought of the "academic input", all this high-falutin stuff that those University people are going to bore them with...the body language, alone tend to send the same message: this academic stuff is not my world, and I'm no longer so sure of myself, so I'm not going to take any risks and make myself look a fool.

This is a problem for us as trainers, because we need a real dialogue with our trainees. First off, we need to know what they are really capable of, not what image they want us to see. Second, we need real-time feedback on what's going on, what's being understood, what we need to do to make it work better. And third we need trainees to feel that the training is about them, not us: we need engagement with what's going on so that what's going on isn't just "input" or even "intake" but *involvement*. But to be really involved, a risk has to be taken: we all have to take the chance that this *will* work rather than assuming it won't. So we think that AFO training can't be content with asking itself "how much". It needs to take the risk of asking those other, more difficult questions...and trusting each other to deal intelligently with whatever responses they elicit. Let's face it: without that trust, what hope is there of having any real impact?

For further information regarding Chris and Sabrina's research on the professionalisation of Firearms instructors please contact us at Sabrina.poma@canterbury.ac.uk

